

Faculty-Student Interactions, Highlights of Best Practices

Note that in this context, “faculty-student interactions” refers to interactions outside the formal classroom setting.

Many studies indicate that the quality and extent of faculty-student interactions have positive effects on student learning, grade point average, intellectual self-concept, problem-solving, critical thinking, and student retention. These gains may be even greater for minority students than for White students, especially when minority students interact with faculty who are in the same minority group.

Five interaction “typologies” have been characterized: disengagement, incidental contact, functional interaction, personal interaction, and mentoring.

Potentially successful faculty-student interactions can be broadly categorized as:

1. **Office hours and advising.** Some faculty convert office hours into small discussion groups where students can come and go, potentially including “brown bag” lunches. For many UF programs, advising is not performed by faculty members.
2. **Small courses specifically designed to increase interaction.** This may be particularly beneficial for incoming students, who may be intimidated to go visit a faculty member. Examples at UF include the First Year Florida courses, and small courses within the Honors Program and other programs.
3. **Faculty mentoring via undergraduate research or creative work.** Examples at UF are the University Scholars Program and other programs that sponsor undergraduate research, and many students working with faculty outside of any program. However, some other universities do a much better job of centralizing and organizing such programs, and of making such activities part of the typical undergraduate experience. Can mentoring of undergraduate research and creative work be more explicitly entered on faculty assignment reports?
4. **Social interactions.** In addition to faculty participation in student housing on campus, many universities invest substantial effort and resources into facilitating and sponsoring faculty - student interaction in an informal setting. These include faculty participating in or organizing meals with students (whether on campus, at the faculty member’s home, or at local restaurants), faculty or students organizing extended trips (e.g., to national academic or scientific meetings, museums or cultural events; on bicycling or hiking excursions), readings or showing of films followed by discussions, team sports activities, weekly lunch seminars. Of these, sponsoring of faculty-student dinners is perhaps the most common.
5. **Online interactions.** There is a clear technology gap between faculty and students, with many students finding online interactions (e.g., through Facebook, Twitter and online chats) to be quite rewarding. There seems to be little effort at any universities to formally encourage faculty to participate in such interactions outside the context of formal online courses, but the opportunities seem large.